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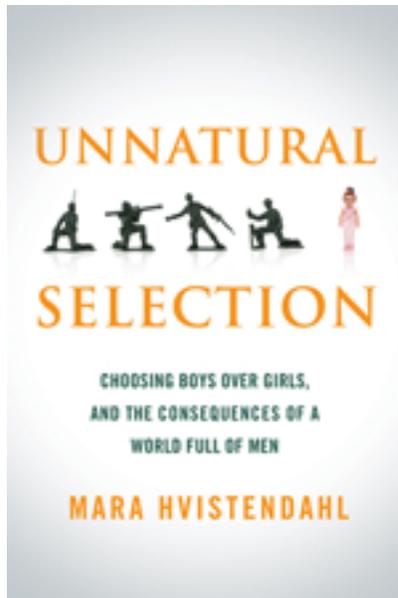
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# Asia's Disappearing Daughters

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By Jeffrey Wasserstrom



Last week witnessed the publication of Mara Hvistendahl's *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men* (Public Affairs, 2011), and over the weekend my take on the book appeared online at the recently relaunched [Asian Review of Books](#). That review is reposted here with the kind permission of the ARB, almost exactly as it ran there. Those who are interested in learning more about Hvistendahl's arguments after reading my essay can, of course, [buy the book](#), but U.S.-based followers of the blog have another option as well: catch one of the public events (including a June 28 L.A. stop) on [this list](#).

Why are there so many more boys than girls in many parts of China—and how worrisome is this phenomenon?

Freelance journalist Mara Hvistendahl had questions like these on her mind several years ago, when she set out to do interviews in Suining, a county midway between Beijing and Shanghai that for much of the past had been "notable only for its ordinariness," as she puts it. Suining, she claims, is the kind of place where even the food veers away from extremes (dishes are "a little spicy, a little salty, a little sweet", neither fiery like those of Sichuan nor as elegant as those of Guangdong) and even the best known historical celebrity started out a man "of humble peasant origins" (before leading a popular rebellion more than two millennia ago that made him Emperor).

What drew her to this otherwise ordinary setting was one extraordinary thing: a gender ratio that, even for China, was horribly off-kilter. In 2007, some 150 boys were being born for every 100 girls (slightly more boys than girls tend to be born globally, but anything over about a 105 to 100 split is considered a significant departure from the norm). The fruits of her time in Suining, where she heard tales confirming that sonograms followed by sex-selective abortions rather than female infanticide were at the root of the problem, was a superb *Virginia Quarterly* article called "Half the Sky: How China's Gender Imbalance Threatens Its Future" (2008). Material from that work of reportage, supplemented by an impressive amount of reading (in scholarly publications in multiple fields and about many lands), plus travels to far flung locales (European and American, as well as Asian), has now been reworked into an ambitious, provocative, and carefully-crafted book, *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*.

Some of her travels were part of an effort to piece together parts of the Chinese gender ratio story, but Hvistendahl (full disclosure: she's an author I met in Shanghai two years ago, have been [interviewed by occasionally](#), have shared a stage with at a [UC Irvine event](#), and have interviewed for [China Beat](#) and the [Huffington Post](#)) also moved outside of China for other reasons. Taking her cue from a milestone 1990 *New York Review of Books* essay by Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, "[More Than 100 Million Women Are Missing](#)", which deals as much with India as with the PRC, she was determined to bring into the picture various parts of Asia (and beyond: Albania gets a look in) where skewed ratios resembling if not quite matching those in Suining can also be found. In addition, she is concerned with ripple effects: the way that a disproportionate number of young males growing up in one area can lead to new kinds of sex trafficking and marriage migration pulling young women out of another. One of the book's most riveting sections, for example, tells of the tragic plight of Vietnamese woman kidnapped and taken across the border into China.

Despite its wide reach, it is the China questions sketched out above that lie at the heart of many sections of *Unnatural Selection*, for the PRC is the Asian country in which the book's widely-traveled author has spent the most time and also the Asian land about which she has read most deeply. And this is all to the good, not just because of China's size and economic significance, but also because an inquiry into Chinese demographic dilemmas has a special timeliness right now. For there is a [debate underway](#) within the PRC about whether the moment has finally come to abandon or dramatically scale what is typically called the "one-child family policy"—a somewhat misleading term, since for most of its history there have been some kinds of couples (e.g., member of ethnic minorities) who have been allowed to have more than one offspring.

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The questions about China that Hvistendahl grapples with, though very much of the moment, are not new—and were not even new when Sen wrestled with them in his oft-cited look at the missing women of Asia two decades ago. I am keenly aware of the longevity of the questions, as they were on my mind more than a quarter-of-a-century ago at the very start of my academic career. In the early 1980s, working toward a master's in East Asian Studies at Harvard, the then-novel reports of Chinese villages with 110 or 120 boys for every 100 girls fascinated me. An effort to work through the phenomenon led to my first research paper using Chinese-language sources (mostly letters to the editor of a PRC women's magazine dealing with prejudice against daughters and mothers who failed to bear sons), and to my first publication: an article on "Resistance to the One-Child Family" in the June 1984 issue of the interdisciplinary journal *Modern China*. I remain proud of that piece, which tried to clear up some basic misconceptions about the dynamic of Chinese birth control efforts early in the post-Mao era, but a decade or so on, I realized how much richer my discussion could have been had I had access to Sen's article with its pairing of China and India. I now realize that an even more multifaceted handling of the theme is possible if one follows the chains of argument that Hvistendahl explores, such as bringing to the surface the complex role that Western "population bomb" theories and development discourses of the 1960s, as well as technological breakthroughs, have played in the tilting toward sons in much of the developing world.

Before saying more about this important aspect of Hvistendahl's book, it's worth recapping briefly the state of play in early discussions of what, for simplicity's sake, I'll refer to by its standard name: the one-child policy. What intrigued me in the early 1980s was how differently, in reports on this subject, skewed sex ratios and the preference for sons over daughters more generally were handled in the Chinese as opposed to the international press, and how little was said in either set of writings about how economic reforms had altered the material benefits of having a son as opposed to a daughter.

What was the thrust of most Western coverage of the Chinese birth control drive at the time? One key theme was that the one-child policy was being enforced via measures that were "draconian" (a favorite word of columnists, in particular). Another, in addition to women being forced to have abortions (the most sensational revelation of the early 1980s), was that there

had been a resurgence of female infanticide. These phenomena became so intertwined in some discussions of the topic that readers could easily conclude that the shockingly high gender imbalance in some counties was part and parcel of government policy, or at the very least, take for granted that the Chinese Communist Party had no concern with male-female ratios, as long as rigid birth quota targets were hit.

In the Chinese press, on the other hand, each sign of a preference for sons over daughters was presented as flouting, or at least failing to accept, official policy. The one-child family drive was predicated on the notion that couples should be happy with a single child, whether male or female. The standard visual propaganda used to promote the policy was of a mother, a father and a daughter as a happy and complete nuclear family unit. Indications of a strong preference relating to the sex of a child, as well as any mistreatment of women for bearing daughters (reflecting the belief that a wife had a responsibility to provide her husband and his family with a male heir and that she somehow determined the sex of the fetus she carried) were condemned in official publications. The magazine *Zhongguo funu* (Chinese Women), which I drew from in my first article, ran heartbreaking first-person accounts of mistreated mothers of daughters, who had been verbally or physically abused by their husbands and one or both of his parents, as well as explanations by the editors of why this behavior was wrong. To condemn these mothers, the magazine claimed, was to act in backward and immoral way: it was to fall pray to "feudal" old patriarchal notions that had no place in the New China. It was also to be "unscientific" in assigning "blame" for an unwanted outcome—the editors sometimes stressed—backing this up with references to fact that the chromosomal make-up of the father's sperm, rather than anything related to the mother, leads some children to be born male, others female.

One of the main points I made in my article in *Modern China* about the enduring preference for sons in the PRC was a fairly simple one, which—had I written the article a bit later—I might have linked to a phrase Bill Clinton would make famous: "It's the economy, stupid." What was left out of the picture in both Western reports (that attributed the problem to official birth control policy) and Chinese commentaries (that treated all gender bias as a holdover of pernicious traditional beliefs) was how having a boy as opposed to a girl was likely to affect the living standard of a rural family. For all the experiments in social engineering Mao Zedong introduced from the 1940s through the 1970s, including some designed to do away with gender bias, the Chinese government had never focused on uprooting the general pattern of rural women marrying into their husband's village.

When marriage works this way, the general rule is that female children cost their natal family resources in the short term and then, once grown, contribute their labor to, and bring offspring, into the household of their in-laws. Grown sons, by contrast, end up not just working for but also bringing new children into their birth family. During the heyday of collectivization under Mao, this differential did not matter nearly as much as it once had, since the family ceased for a time being the most important economic unit. Crucially, though, two of the main early post-Mao policies were a shift toward allowing farming families to keep profits from land they worked and the drive to limit births. In other words, there was what Mao would have called (as this was one of his favorite terms) a fundamental "contradiction": people were told it was inappropriate to prefer sons to daughters at precisely the moment that, in addition to whatever lingering old gender bias had remained in place, a new economic incentive favoring male over female children was coming into play.

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One of the many accomplishments of Hvistendahl's book is to show that there have been additional "contradictions" at work in the pan-Asian "missing women" phenomenon. For simplicity's sake, we can boil these down to contradictions linked to visions of what it means to be "modern" and contradictions tied to technology.

A central element in the first sort of contradiction pre-dates the implementation of the one-child family policy. It goes back to Western writings in the 1950s and 1960s that harped on the apocalyptic implications of high birth-rates in the developing world.

Here, in a much stripped down form, is my paraphrasing of the way Hvistendahl lays out the situation, in sections that owe and acknowledge a considerable debt to Columbia University historian Matthew Connelly's important book, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Harvard University Press, 2008):

*If only, some proponents of "population bomb" thinking argued, methods could be found to ensure that couples outside of the West embraced more "modern" small family ideals. Given the strong bias toward sons in many places, one thing needed was to make sure that couples who kept having daughters would not just keep trying and trying to have a male offspring. To solve the problem of overpopulation, the key would be to convince couples that having more than two children was no longer feasible (the planet could not take having people procreate at more than just this replacement level)—and allow them to be confident that one of those children would be a son (e.g., if their first child was a girl, give them much better than a 105 to 100 chance that the second would be a boy). But something was left out of the equation here: if a magical means could suddenly appear to guarantee that hundreds of millions of couples wanting to stop at two children, who had a girl first, had a boy next, the result would be a dangerously off kilter demographic picture. There would soon be an incredibly large number of men who would be expected to marry (and for the most part would want to marry), but would grossly outnumber eligible women.*

Turning to technology, recent decades have seen moves toward—or full realization of—various sex selection methods that can alter the odds dramatically in favor of having a son or daughter, depending on a couple's wishes. These range from the relatively low-tech (sonogram machines that reveal the sex of a fetus) to methods so high-tech they border on science fiction (fiddling with genes to produce babies with sought-after traits). The contradiction here is that, while reports of skewed gender ratios in China in the 1980s sometimes focused on the re-emergence of a very old method of diminishing the number of girls in an area (infanticide by drowning), the single biggest factor in the current tilt toward boys in many parts of Asia has been sex-selective abortion by couples who have learned, after amniocentesis or more often a sonogram, that a pregnancy (in many cases, a second or third one in a son-less family) would lead to a daughter's birth.

What we have here is a messy combination of factors that take us far beyond a clash between "traditional" values and state policies. We find instead situations in which old preferences are reinforced by new practices (e.g., the economic reforms in the Chinese countryside) and can be acted upon by using new machines. There is no "typical" Asian couple responsible for contributing to the large number of "excess men" (males growing up in areas with too few female age mates), but Hvistendahl shows that, when imagining one, we might do well to conjure up a couple striving to embrace a modern ideal (only having two children) and making use of modern technologies, rather than let our minds think only of a "traditional" and "backward" pair who need to be educated by the state to have their ideas brought up to date.

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*Unnatural Selection* does much more than complicate the picture of the causes of skewed sex ratios. What I have not touched upon are the parts of the book that delve into past and present visions of the problems that can be caused by populations with disproportionate numbers of men—sections that creatively move between quotes relating to the American "Wild West" (a violent setting where women were scarce) and material drawn from scholarly monographs on Chinese peasant rebellions in which "bare sticks" (bachelors without marriage prospects) played crucial roles. Also deserving of mention is Hvistendahl's intriguing analysis of the links between efforts to be able to select for sex and to select for other traits (from immunity to particular diseases to specific facial features and skin tones)—an analysis that takes her from East and South Asia to a Southern California clinic.

Neither have I described her clever method of keeping a book of this kind lively and readable: making sure that each chapter features a life story (this is revealed in chapter titles such as "The Demographer", "The Parent", "The Geneticist", "The Prostitute", and "The Bachelor");

nor, indeed, the tricky moral line she walks on a hot-button issue, staking out a nuanced position on abortion that reflects her commitments as a feminist and concern about the ill effects of easy access to techniques that can end a pregnancy that is unwanted because of the sex of a fetus.

It is a book that does a great many things well. In the end, though, its most important take-away point is likely to be the need—when thinking about the causes and “the consequences of a world full of men” (to borrow a term from her subtitle) —to remember that the situation involves many strands. I know that, after reading it, I will never think about Asia’s disappearing daughters in the same way again. And to pay the author a much higher compliment, I would wager that, after reading *Unnatural Selection*, Amartya Sen might well feel tempted to say the exact same thing.